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ABSTRACT

A sensitivity to both a story's content and art form can bring children to the understandings and feelings that are basic to the humane encounter that is education. Two approaches seem to dominate the use of stories in schools today. The first is the placement of literary selections in basal readers. However, the ways in which teachers are encouraged to use the stories and poems to teach phonics, sight words, and word attack and comprehension skills not only violate what is known about the reading process, but also ignore the intent of the literary work. The second approach to using literature involves its prominent but misplaced function as a classroom management technique. Too often this technique is used to quiet an exuberant class after recess or before the "real business" of school begins. A more powerful and beneficial alternative begins with respect for the veracity of children's highly individual responses to a strong story such as "The Fiddler of High Lonesome"--a literary tale rich in the form and feeling of a traditional story from the Appalachian Mountains. A few of the possible ways of organizing potential responses to this and other stories include regional study, social history, cultural or moral issues, and discussions of individuals in groups. Or, the actual evolution of a period of instruction might result in a set of relationships, anticipated or unexpected, that connects the topics of areas of studies. Both approaches share two fundamental premises: that the child's response is the beginning point for any instruction that may follow and that forcing a response to fit a predetermined focus excludes the learner and the story from the learning process. (HOD)

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Understanding the Storyteller's Art

by

William Curtis and Hughes Moir

The story and storytelling are the most essentially human experiences from which people have found pleasure and satisfaction. They are experiences from which people have learned how and why to laugh and cry, to feel fear and to know courage. Stories are a deep well from which people have drawn strength, encouragement, and inspiration.

It is from stories we learn our connectedness and continuity as family members, as a society, as a culture; our roles and responsibilities, our expectations, and the expectations of others.

It is from stories we learn our mores and our values as a group and as a member of that group, so that we will understand our obligations to others and the meaning of justice.

It is from stories we learn the melodies and nuances of our language and the languages of others, so that we can appreciate our similarities and respect our differences.

The collective strength of a people -- as well as of individuals -- lies in their cultural memory embedded forever in their stories.

The Storyteller's Art

Storytelling is probably mankind's earliest art form. Stories served to assure family and group cohesiveness by recounting the history of the group and the religious heritage that bound people together by common experiences, fears, and aspirations. Inherent in stories were, and are, the values and beliefs, the deeds and dreams that gave each listener assurance and stability to guide him or her to successful and satisfying membership in the family and the larger group.

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Storytellers were respected and appreciated for their memory, their vision, their wisdom, and their ability to use language artfully so that the past seemed present in the minds and hearts of their audience. In some cultures certain stories were the private property of individual tellers; such oral copyrights required the arrival of the teller to hear a particular tale. In many cultures, storytellers travelled throughout a country or region finding a willing -- and, often, paying -- audience in large cities and rural villages. In time the storyteller became the shaman, the wise man, the religious leader, the healer, the teacher, the salesman, or politician depending upon the place and time. More often, however, the storyteller was a parent or grandparent or aunt or uncle who could spin a good yarn for the delight of the entire family gathering.

So stories were fashioned and transformed through the oral tradition, a human process that has continued despite the evolution of Gutenberg's moveable type or St. Columba's[1] legendary feats that brought the printed (or handwritten) word to an increasingly literature world.

Today the growth of world literacy and the marvel of electronic communications have transformed the role of the storyteller's art. The millions of copies of hundreds of thousands of books currently in print worldwide attest to the continued dead and desire for the word fixed in print. Radio, movies, television, nes media, and computer communication tell their stories around the clock in every country on the globe. The cartoons shown on television on Saturday mornings have become the solid state fairy tales in the Age of Communications, creating a common sub-culture of childhood that cuts across ethnic, geographic, and economic boundries in this country. The afternoon soap operas are simply an adult extension of this phenomenon.

In our schools it often seems fashionable to regard stories as frivolous to the "important business" of education. It often seems necessary to relegate telling or reading stories to one of a set of learned techniques to quiet exuberant children (e.g., a five minute filler before lunch or just after recess). When the apparent demands to teach for skills mastery or to finish workbook pages compete for precious available time in a school day, the fundamental importance can be frequently overlooked. In a regressive period in education, where the new code words are "teacher accountability," performance testing," and "management by objectives," what is truly basic to human development has become viewed as an endangered species.

Given the growth and direction of international technologies and the new faces of schooling, it is pleasantly surprising and reassuring to be witness to a rebirth of interest in the traditional art of storytelling, a rekindling of appreciation for the human contact of the story artfully told to a group of people gathered to hear and watch and enjoy stories. Perhaps it is because of the very growth of an impersonal electronic story medium and emphasis on teaching for easy recall that this renaissance meets a deep human need for direct contact and shared human experience.

We are convinced from visiting school and meeting with many teachers, that good teachers know and have always known that stories are vital to the human growth of every school child; that stories are for students of all ages; and that stories can be and are shared regularly in classrooms. Good teachers know that stories provide a sure means of awakening the joy, the curiosity, and the wonder of learning, and for stimulating achievement of human potential in classrooms everywhere.

By exploring one well-known story we intend to suggest how, through sensitivity to both the story's content and form, the full power of this and other

stories can bring children to the understandings and feelings that are truly basic to the humane encounter that is education.

The Fiddler of High Lonesome by Brinton Turkle[2] is a literary tale rich in the form and feeling of a traditional story from the Appalachian Mountains. It tells not only the tragic consequences when the ruthless and hardliving Fogels confront the innocence and gentleness of their distant relative, Lysander Bochamp, but it also offers glimpses of an aspect of life in parts of our country, and raises profound moral questions that remain unsolved today.

The Language of the Story

Younder mountain is called High Lonesome. Nowadays, nobody lives up there -- nobody but the critters.

Thus the story begins with language that not only leads us into the beauty of language itself, but also into the characterization of the people within the story. A puny little fellow toting a couple of bundles come into the valley and started to climb High Lonesome. "Don't shoot!" he called out. "I ain't the law. I'm your kin."

The language, or dialect, leads us to a surer feeling of the time and of the place so that we can know the language in a real sense of the way people in that time and place talked. All the way through the story one finds language that is true:

"No sir, I don't much favor shootin'."

"You ain't no kin of ourn," said Old Man Fogle.

"Yes I is, my mammy were a Fogle. Please let me bide with you. I'm lonesome all by myself."

"Boys," said the old man, "let's see if he kin dance a jig." And the Fogles raised their rifles and fired.

Dialect fills all of language and is representative of the way people communicate. It is important how we talk and how writers show that we talk in unique and interesting ways, that we aren't encumbered with a universal dialect, but that we have this beautiful expansion of dialect that respects words like "tolerable:" "Kin you play it (Lysander's fiddle)?' "Tolerable." And when he begins to play, Hunk says, "Play somethin' pert and lively." That's part of the key to languaging.

Sometimes just before sundown the wind would carry his music to the valley below. Folks claimed it made them remember times that was better and loved ones that was gone. Even the little bitty children would stop their playing and just listen. This is beautiful language. It explains what is happening, but it touches you at the same time. On the other side of that,

"They's varmints!" said the Fogles. "Everybody kills varmints! Git a knife, Bochamp, and lend a hand."

"They's critters. You killed 'em; you skin 'em. I won't have no truck with it," he said. And he went off to the woodpile to chop kindling wood. The Fogles like to have skinned him. "Sure as shootin'," they grumbled, "he ain't one of us."

This lays the foundation for the story line through language -- language that excites and arouses the imagination to the times, to the setting, and to the people upon whom this story turns.

When the fiddler went to Jellicoe's Mill in the hollow below to play for the Saturday night dance, Aunt Sally Larkin sashayed around like she was fifty year younger. As city folks, we haven't hear "sashayed around" for years. And then Aunt Sally Larkin says, "I ain't heerd playin' like that since I were a girl. It's better for my rheumatism than stump water." Old Man Fogle just puffs out his chest and says, "His Mammy were a Fogle." "I declare," said

Aunt Sally Larkin, "it's just lovely! He's one of us, sure as shootin'!" The audience is inevitably drawn into the story line and into the language of the storyteller. We are comfortable in this new place in this byegone time. And we care about the characters who suddenly have become very real to us.

When the Fogles hear that "the Law" is up in the mountain, they were excited. They said, "Law? Where's the Law?" Right away the young Fogles was reaching for their guns. Certainly this is the kind of language that gives clear insight into the characters of the story, as well as carrying the audience into the next turn of the plot. In using dialect, the author not only uses language in the same sense that every American uses dialectical patterns, but he also shows his audience that there are a multiplicity of language styles that allow us to communicate effectively in different ways, that give the audience a sense of what is happening.

We strongly advocate using dialect with children, and helping children to experiment with dialects in the same way as using Kipling's Just So Stories where the language is much more formal. In The Fiddler of High Lonesome, however, the dialect seems to say, "I'm here to touch you, I'm here to talk to you, I'm here to feel your presence." Rather than the distant formal language of Kipling, one can feel the essence, that quality, of language directly. Hearing he plays for his critters tonight, one must feel, here, that it is Lysander Bochamp who really has the thrill.

Then a panther. Bochamp never seen a live one before. It danced around in circles. And then a whole family of skunks come out and even the little bitty ones was waving their tails in time to the music, trying to keep up with their mammy and pappy. It was so comical, Lysander Bochamp could hardly keep from laughing out loud. Just as the music must have worked its charm, so does language to the storyteller. It touches the audience as surely as the

fiddle music did to the critters. It is language that calls attention to itself, that encourages interest and excitment in language all around each of us.

At the end, when the Fogles start shooting the animals and killing them off one after another, the fervor of the Fogles is just electric. "Halleujah," he (Old Man Fogle) yelled, "Hallelujah! I shore am glad you boys come fer me. I never seed such a thing in all my born days." He kicked over the panther. "That's Old Sluefoot. Danged if I didn't git him after all these years!"

And they are thrilled! "We're going to shoot and kill all the varmints in the state!" said the old man. "You boys ought to be mighty proud of yore kin. Bochamp here is turnin' into some account after all."

When Lysander saw a little raccoon that was tossing and twisting in agony on the ground making little noises, he shot it to put it out of its misery. And it didn't jump around no more. He handed the gun back to Hunk and picked up his fiddle. "I ain't no kin of yourn," he said, and walked off into the trees.

When Old Man Fogle and his sons died some time later, "Good riddance," most of the folks in the valley said. But sometimes when the moon is full, you can hear strange sounds in the hills if you listen careful. Wild sweet sounds. "It's only the wind, some folks say. But there's others that say, "Hark! It's the fiddler of High Lonesome. He's playin' for his critters tonight."

If children can't identify with the story in terms of the language creating the content, it may be that they're not aware of language and that we need to communicate a great deal of the literature that is of quality and that represents our dialects. Our language is represented in the story, and so are we. Sensitivity to dialects is the key to becoming sensitive to ourselves.

The Meaning of Stories

Two approaches seem to dominate the use of stories in schools today. The first is the placement of literary selections in basal readers, which are used by upwards of 90% of all teachers, at least in the United States. A great deal of time and though is devoted to decisions regarding which selections shall be included: their readability levels, their lack of ethnic offense, their audience appeal, their critical acclaim, and if and how they shall be abridged. Including children's literature materials in basal readers is a point of promotional pride by publishers.

However, the ways in which teachers are encouraged to use the stories and poems to teach phonics, sight words, and word attack and comprehension skills not only often violate what we know about the reading process, but they also ignore the intent of a literary work. In current practice, the flow and patterns of the language and plot are frequently interrupted to check on word definitions and grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and to pose comprehension questions. When the story is read -- or "covered" -- smoothly or haltingly depending upon whether the groups are bluebirds or buzzards, the "reward" is the next page in the workbook which, often as not, bears little relation to the story or to the child's reading needs. This daily routine has created a cycle of emotional and intellectual poverty as vicious as any we know. Some critics have suggested we were better off using Dick and Jane readers; at least, they say, we rarely confused reading instruction materials with good literature.

The second approach to using literature involves its prominent but misplaced function as a classroom management technique. We have all known too many teachers who have used a story or poem to quiet an exuberant class after recess and before the "real" business of school begins. Or, to fill five minutes before lunch, or when the busses are late, or on a rainy day. A story

is what a child can read when he or she is finished with a workbook page or ditto sheet while waiting for the next assignment. A survey of teachers in elementary schools a few years ago showed that approximately 80% of the teachers surveyed regularly "use literature in these ways.[3]

What these teachers may confuse is temporary distraction with the power of literature to involve intensively its audience in a story -- in its mood and movement, in its characters and tension, in its language and images. And, ultimately, and most profoundly, in the culture of the story. These teachers are unaware of the potential of literature to create a response in children that moves the mind, the imagination, and the heart of the reader or listener to become the character in the story -- to evoke the smells, the soudns, and the images of one living through the story. These teachers are unaware that a story has the power to engage a child in what Louise Rosenblatt terms a personal "transaction" in coming to know more fully his world and his place in it.[4] That is, through stories a child or adult can reflect upon the possibilities of his life within a larger frame, and with greater clarity and confidence.

In pedagogical terms, these teachers may be unthoughtful of literature to work cooperatively with them to help children grasp subjects and concepts and insights that are proper aims of the school curriculum beyond the limitations of the common textbook. For example, science teachers will find their pupils will know and enjoy more their subject if included among instructional materials are such stories as Alan Arkin's The Lemming Condition,[5] Tomie DePaola's Quicksand Book,[6] Dorothy Aldis' sensitive nature poetry found in Quick As A Wink,[7] almost any book by Jean George, and, for more mature students, Judith Herbert Kohl's prizewinning View From The Oak.[8] Mathematical concepts are easily grapsed in a variety of dimensions with such books as Marcia Brown's

Listen To A Shape,[9] or Michael Holt's Maps, Tracks, And the Bridges of Konigsberg.[10] Even the youngest audiences will delight in the Emberley's Wing On A Flea[11] and One Wide River To Cross[12] while absorbing mathematical concepts.

A more powerful and beneficial alternative to this literary supplement approach begins with respect for the veracity of children's highly individual responses to a strong story. Such a story evokes deep personal meanings and images that come from a reader's transaction with intriguing charcters, understandable action and tension within the plot, and language that calls attention to itself: a total story experience that holds the potential for exploring many emotions and ideas separately -- or all at once. The Fiddler Of High Lonesome is one such story. Brinton Turkle has created a hauntingly true story rooted in the tradition of the American Folk Tale. It is a story worth sharing -- a story to be deeply felt and savored -- a strong story that is memorable to the many young readers who have been fortunate to have heard it.

How might this story serve the teacher in the classroom -- while serving children? One must begin by anticipating nothing and everything. We know, as James Squire[13] showed a generation ago, that children's responses cannot be predicted by traditional demographic characteristics, that children make meaning from text in part because of the text and in part because of what they bring to a text. A wise teacher knows to be open to all possibilities and to respect the truth and depth of children's responses as beginning points for any discussion, activity, or instruction that may follow. Though predicting with certainty is a fruitless exercise, experience with sharing the story offers some general areas of potential response. These are at least possible starting places to begin planning in anticipation.

Children we know who have heard this story seem to be impressed by several aspects of Brinton Turkle's tale for example:

1. The names of the characters. "deet" and "sud" are certainly unusual. "Hunk" carries more that mere character identification. By comparison, "Lysander Bochamp," as one student told us, "sounds gentle."
2. Since most of the children with whom we have worked are urban born and bred, they are fascinated with the ways of "hill folks:" how they live, what they eat, how they spend their time, and so forth.
3. Children are thoughtful of their own sense of kinship with their extended families and the emotional need this relationship fulfills with they consider Lysander's encounter with the Fogles. They may not say so in so many words, but discussions that have followed hearing the story reveal that they understand and empathize with Lysander's need for a family, even the Fogles.
4. A fundamental, deeply-felt reaction to living in an isolated area as High Lonesome evokes a sense of fear in many children: the fear of being alone. Even the title, The Fiddler of High Lonesome, rings an inner chime in many children's ears. Mountains, as a place to live, seem to evoke a bittersweet tentativeness that becomes part of many children's response.
5. If animals have always held a special place with children, then it is no accident that this story creates a rich variety of responses when children hear of the Fogel's senseless killing of animals or of Lysander's putting the "little critter" out of its misery. It is a natural extension of these responses to discuss the larger question of man's right to encroach of natural areas.

These are just some of the most common aspects to which children respond upon hearing this story. A wise teacher holds open these and all other possibilities as potential starting points for instructional planning.

Teachers who have shared this story with their classes have found a number of different ways to use this story while maintaining the integrity of the story and respect for a child's response. In doing so, the story becomes a cultural artifact by which children can veiw another group from the outside and, simultaneously, hold a mirror to their culture for reflected comparisons. Here is a sampling of topical approaches:

1. Regional Study: That is, the social, political, and economic history of that region known in America as Appalachia -- its history of migration and settlement; local economies past and present; geographical features, including plant and animal life.
2. Social History: Comparing ethnic or regional customs: folk arts, music, dance, toys, foods, and crafts; oral histories and geneology; family membership, roles and responsibilities.
3. Cultural or Moral Issues: Laws versus family traditions or local mores; man's encroachment on nature; endangered species protection; mercy killing.
4. Discussion of Individual in the Group: Being alone, either in isolation or in a group; being different and/or excluded; the role of the artist in society; the effects of and response to geographical isolations; ostracism.

These are just a few of the possible ways of organizing potential responses to this and other stories. With an emphasis on both "efferent" and "aesthetic" responses[14] of children to this story, a teacher can anticipate instruction in at least two ways. First, this story might be used in relation to conventional subject areas, social studies, science, and the arts to name just three, as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1

SOCIAL STUDIES TOPICS

1. Mountains/Appalachia
2. Mountain People, Mountain Ways
3. Kinships
4. Local Economies
5. Family and Place Names: Origins
6. Fear: Sources and Resolution
7. Physical and Psychic Isolation
8. Laws, Rules, and Mores
9. Etc.

SCIENCE TOPICS

1. Regional Plants and Animals
2. Plant and Animal Adaptation
3. Mills: Their Location, Construction, and Function
4. Folk Medicine
5. Distillation
6. Mountain Building Processes/Geology
7. Etc.

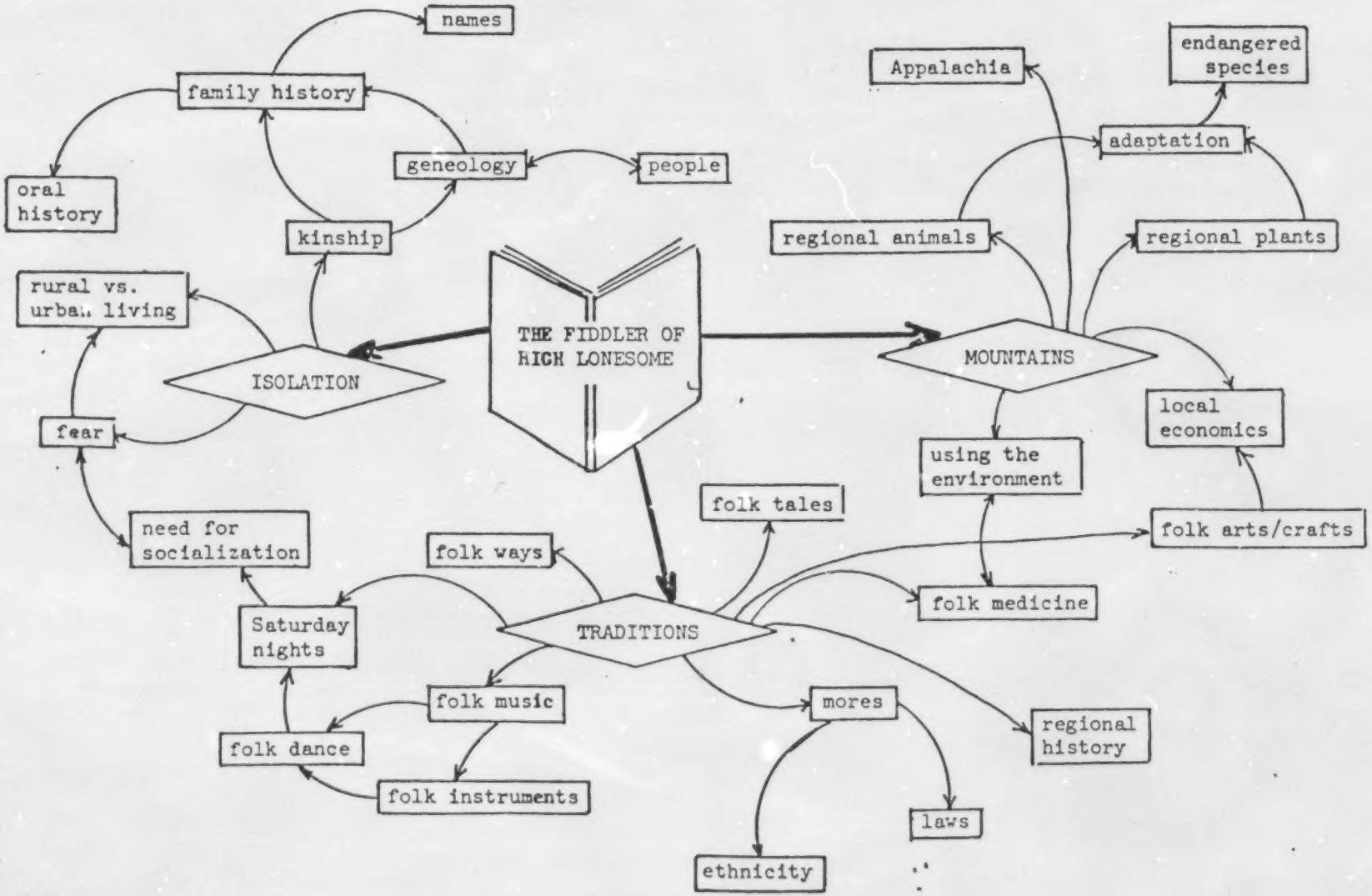
ARTS TOPICS

1. Folk Music: Roots and Variation
2. Folk Dances
3. Folk Crafts
4. Traditional Literature
5. Book Illustration Techniques
6. Etc.

Less conventionally, the actual evolution of a period of instruction might result in a set of relationships, anticipated or unexpected, that connects topics or areas of studies shown in Figure 2. Rather than plan for a finite list of topics, this second approach encourages the teacher to develop a period of study based upon children's responses as they occur. The result is a less structured, more individualized organization or related activities.

By anticipating potential responses -- without discouraging the uniqueness of the meaning made by each student -- the teacher can gather together a wide variety of likely resources for children to pursue individual or small group interests. Related materials, such as additional books, movies, records, objects,

Figure 2


names
family history
oral history
geneology
people
kinship
rural vs. urban living
ISOLATION
fear
need for socialization
Saturday nights
folk music
folk dance
folk instruments
THE FIDDLER OF HIGH LONESOME
TRADITIONS
folk ways
folk tales
mores
ethnicity
laws
Appalachia
endangered species
adaptation
regional animals
regional plants
MOUNTAINS
using the environment
local economics
folk arts/crafts
folk medicine
regional history

plus resource people and field trip locations serve to support and encourage personal or group study in depth. The two approaches differ only in terms of the teacher's willingness to limit planned instruction to a predetermined set of topics. Rather than encourage personal exploration of ideas that emerge from the child's response.

Both approaches, however, share two fundmental premises: that the child's response is the beginning point for any instruction that may follow, and that forcing a response to fit a predetermined focus excludes the learner -- and the story -- from full participation in the learning process. Validating the importance and the truth of the child's transaction with literature makes possible the full engagment of each child's response to the story. Without this tacit recognition, the story as a reflection of culture and the power of the child's response are belittled to just another way to calm restless pupils and regain a false sense of control over longsuffering children.

The Truth of Stories

However one encounters stories and storytellers, whether as readers, as part of a captivated audience to a yarnspinner, or in a class where the teacher has planned activities for extending exploration of a story read or told, the impact of the encounter enriches our lives.

It is from stories we understand why others think and act as they do, and that we can understand why we think and act as we do;

It is because we are truly social beings that stories provide the necessary cement that binds each of us to the other;

It is in stories that we can imagine the unreal, and can realize the unimagined.

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